

Sixth Sunday of Easter

First reading:

*The Gospel spreads to Samaria
(Acts 8.5-8, 14-17)*

The story of Acts is the spread of the gospel to 'the ends of the earth'. The first few chapters described the ideal Church at Jerusalem. All this was shattered by the persecution that erupted into Stephen's martyrdom. We missed out that story, reserving it for St Stephen's feast on Boxing Day.

The effect of things getting too hot in Jerusalem is that the Word of the Lord begins to spread beyond the city, and first to Samaria, the country region just north of Jerusalem. The peace of God's Kingdom comes to the Samaritans in the form of liberation from sickness and the torment of various diseases. Luke notes for us the joy which this brings, a joy that is the sign of the Kingship of God.

It is notable that the distinction between the gift of faith and the fuller gift of the Spirit is already marked in the same way as the distinction in the modern Church between Baptism and Confirmation. The apostles come to administer the sacrament, just as nowadays the bishop comes, marking the unity of the Church and the special position of the successors of the apostles.

Question:

Is the presence of the Spirit in the Church a matter of joy to me?

Second reading:

*Defence of the Faith
(1 Peter 3.15-18)*

This final reading from the first Letter of Peter gives a heartening model for defence in persecution. In modern society, any persecution faced is more likely to be verbal mockery or contempt than blood shedding.

A Christian stance on moral issues can so easily incur charges of narrow mindedness or blindness. It is not always easy to keep one's temper and give a fair and helpful reply 'with courtesy and respect', expressing the consequences of the Christian hope. Such a reply just might strike a chord deep down, rather than an explosive or sarcastic riposte, which merely deepens the divide. This can be a real and important Christian witness.

The final sentences of the reading are helpful here, for the accounts of Jesus' trial stress that Jesus himself was silent 'like a lamb before its shearers' as the Suffering Servant of the Lord, in fulfilment of the scriptures. The Passion account is full of irony and mockery, from the High Priest, from Pilate, from the soldiers; but if Jesus himself did not explode at the false accusations and mockery, but retained his dignified silence, we, too, should keep our cool and reply with courtesy.

Question:

How do you reply to mockery of the Catholic or Christian stance?

Gospel:

The Advocate whom the Father will send

(John 14.15-21)

Only in John is the Spirit, whom the Father will send, called 'the Advocate' or 'the Paraclete'. Both names have the same derivation and the same meaning, but the former is from the Latin, the latter from the Greek. It means someone 'called to one's side' as a helper, principally as a defender in a lawsuit. The word 'Paraclete' also suggests comfort and strength, as implied in the quality 'paraclesis' or perseverance.

In the discourse after the Last Supper, when Jesus is preparing his disciples for their future task, there are four separate sayings about the Paraclete. The Paraclete is sent both by Jesus and by the Father, but always from the Father's side. The Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, will teach the disciples everything and lead them into all truth, witnessing to the Father. The Paraclete is 'another Paraclete', that is, other than Jesus, who will make Jesus present when Jesus is no longer physically with them.

The close link and interplay between these three figures gives us not only the beginnings of the theology of the Trinity, but also a lasting confidence that Jesus is never absent from his Church. With the guidance and patronage of the Paraclete the Church enters more and more deeply into the understanding of the divine mystery.

Question:

Have you ever felt especially helped by the Spirit of Jesus?
